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ABSTRACT

For the Aboriginal peoples of Ontario, literacy is a process involving not only individuals, but also the whole community. Literacy leads to development and empowerment, which contribute to self-determination. Once the wards of the federal government, Aboriginal communities now are assuming more control over their own affairs. Education, including literacy, is key to such control. Aboriginal literacy practitioners seek to "place education into culture" by using the holistic approach and by considering the elements of self, community, family, and the universe (world view) during program development. The Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONLC) is comprised of 31 urban and reserve-based literacy projects. ONLC provides networking opportunities, training for Native literacy practitioners, culturally sensitive program materials, and advocacy on all levels. Literacy practitioners are from the home community and have knowledge of community members and culture, a sincere belief in the student, creative abilities, organizational skills, and deep commitment. Community coordinators recruit students, train tutors, develop or adapt materials to local situations, and raise funds. Because programs are community based and student centered, a variety of models have emerged, many of them involving cultural education and the whole language approach. Fourteen projects include literacy in an Aboriginal language. Practitioners meet for a week every 3 months, take courses, and visit successful programs. They identified the two most important courses in helping them enhance student self-esteem: the Healing Circle and Prior Learning Assessment (a portfolio development process). (SV)

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Chapter 15
EMPOWERING PEOPLE & BUILDING COMPETENT COMMUNITIES

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LITERACY INVOLVES THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

For the Aboriginal peoples of Ontario, literacy is a process involving not only the individuals, but also the whole community. Literacy leads to development and empowerment which will contribute to self-determination. Cox, et al[1] describes community development as "a process designed to create conditions of economic and social progress with the active participation of the whole community and the fullest possible reliance on the community's initiative". Tribal Sovereignty Associates, an Aboriginal consulting firm whose focus is community development, sees the community as performing five basic functions — economic, political, social, educational and cultural. "In order to meet the human needs within a community, programs and services must be structured within these areas. These areas do not operate in isolation of each other, rather, they are interdependent."[2]

For example, while community-based Aboriginal literacy programs are ostensibly **educational** in nature, the program participants are having their **social** needs met, and their social skills developed. In addition for the program to be effective, it must have **political** support (endorsed by Band Council or the Board of Directors). Of necessity, the programs are **cultural** in focus (we do not want to be a group of Aboriginal peoples perpetuating the non-Aboriginal approach which did not work for us in the first place). These programs also impact on the community **economically**. They provide paid employment for people indigenous to the neighbourhood[3] and either develop or enhance the employment skills of program participants.

Uppermost in peoples' minds is the question, "In what languages should Aboriginal peoples become literate?" Presently, in Ontario the official languages are English and French. However, the languages of the original inhabitants of Ontario fall into two major linguistic groups, Algonquian and Iroquoian. The Algonquian linguistic group includes Algonquin, Cree, Ojibway, Delaware, Odawa and Potowatomi. The Iroquoian linguistic group encompasses Mohawk, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca and Tuscarora. Further, Ojibway, Cree and Mohawk each have dialects. Through intermarriage and migratory patterns, Aboriginal peoples from other language groups reside in Ontario. Current policy of the Ontario Ministry of Education states that if the parents or guardians of 15 or more qualified students request an Aboriginal language program, the school board must provide the program pending the availability of a qualified teacher. Where this policy does not take effect, instruction is provided in English and/or French. Aboriginal peoples contend, however, that it is our right to become literate in our language of origin as well as English and/or French.

Many people choose to focus on the grim statistics and social indicators of the plight of Aboriginal peoples. According to the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada customized data, based on the 1986 Census of Canada, the percentage of the Registered Indian population with less than Grade nine education is 37.1% as compared to 17.1% for the general population. Further, the percentage of the Registered Indian population with at least high school education is 27.5% as compared to 55.9% for the general population. Due to lower levels of educational attainment, Registered Indians are likely to continue to experience lower levels of employment success, a tendency to be employed in unskilled jobs of shorter duration and lower earning power.[4] Phil Fontaine, Grand Chief of the Manitoba Assembly of Chiefs says, "We are the poorest of the poor".

However, Aboriginal literacy practitioners choose to heed the words of Penner,[5] "massive improvements in the quality of education of Indian students are absolutely essential to the success of the current drive for Indian self-determination and self-government." For the past six years, we have been taking the community development approach in literacy to make those massive improvements in the quality of education for program participants.

Inherent in their lower levels of educational attainment is the disproportionately low number of Aboriginal peoples in positions of political power. For this reason, we feel that literacy is an important first step in self-government.

AN OVERVIEW OF ABORIGINAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

In 1492, Queen Isabella of Spain sent Christopher Columbus on a mission to the Indies. Unfortunately, his ships went off course and Columbus landed on the shores of North America. Because he thought he had reached India, Columbus mistakenly identified the Aboriginal peoples who greeted him as "Indians".

Since then, this misnomer has been applied to Aboriginal peoples.

Before Jacques Cartier set foot in 1534 on what is now known as Canada and for a couple of hundred years afterwards, Aboriginal nations existed with their own complex institutions of government. The common theme running through these various types of governments is that laws and customs were given to the Aboriginal peoples by the Creator and that no one could take them away. Aboriginal peoples chose their own leaders according to their own traditions. One of the best known, the Iroquois, also known as the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, governed through a formalized constitution and a code of laws for its people. Each clan was represented by a male and a female leader. Consensus was the form of decision making. This confederacy was the model American colonies used for their first union.[6]

The passage of *The Indian Act* by the Canadian Parliament in 1868 (and its revision in 1876) marked the removal of self-determination from peoples who had, up until that time, governed themselves. This Act defined who was legally recognized as "Indian" and who was not, thus the terms "status" or "registered" and "non-status". Under the provisions of this Act, certain tracts of land, known as "reserves" were set aside for Indians. Those who fit the definition of the Euro-Canadian authors of the Act now had to live on these reserves. These groups of people became known as "Indian Bands'. The federal government allocated funding for these bands. "Indian Agents" also lived on the reserves. These Indian Agents were non-Indian employees of the Department of Indian Affairs. It was their responsibility to administer the funding from Indian Affairs and to ensure that the Band members lived according to the provisions of *The Indian Act*.

In effect, Indians were wards of the federal government. The focus of the government was the systematic assimilation of Indians into the ways of the dominant society. Indians were not permitted to practice their own spiritual traditions. Ceremonies were outlawed. Indian students were sent to residential schools where they were not allowed to speak their language. Not only did *The Indian Act* strengthen the government's control over Indians and reserve lands, it imposed for the first time on Indians the concept of an elected band and council. Once a people free to roam across the continent, Indians found themselves confined to land that they were allowed to use, but could not own.[7]

Under the provisions of *The Indian Act*, those legally defined as Indians were entitled to certain rights:

- statutory, such as tax exemption under certain conditions;
- treaty, such as hunting and fishing on their reserves; and,
- discretionary, such as medical and educational coverage.

Those who did not fit the definition of Indian were not allowed to live on these tracts of land, nor did they have the above-outlined rights. Further, a non-Indian woman who married an Indian man could gain these rights, and an Indian

woman who married a non-Indian man lost them. In 1985, *Bill C-31, An Act to Amend the Indian Act*, restored to women and their first generation children rights they had lost.

As a result of *The Indian Act*, the provincial governments regarded Indian peoples as the exclusive responsibility of the federal government. While programs and services were provided to Indian peoples by the federal government, they had virtually no say in how these programs and services would look. Indeed, it was not until 1960 that Indian peoples were given the right to vote in federal elections. However, in the mid-1980's, Aboriginal peoples began to receive provincial services in a non- discriminatory and culturally-sensitive manner.[8]

On June 25, 1969, the Minister of Indian Affairs, stood before the first session of the 28th Parliament to read, *The Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy*. This "White Paper" of 1969 contained six basic points:

1. *The Indian Act* would be repealed leaving Indians with no different status than any other Canadian;
2. other federal departments and levels of government, particularly the provinces, would provide services for Indians in the same way they provided services for other Canadian residents;
3. the Department of Indian Affairs would be dismantled within five years;
4. Indians would be given control of Indian lands;
5. everyone in Canada would recognize the "unique contribution" that Indian people have made to the country — those furthest behind would be helped the most; and,
6. "lawful obligations" would be met.

The reasoning behind the government's proposed abolition of *The Indian Act* was that the special status conferred upon Indians by the Act and a separate government department to look after their needs was the key to discrimination. Government felt it was the major stumbling block to Indian progress.

Indian leaders reacted very strongly to this announcement citing that there had not been any consultation with the Indian community regarding the abolition of *The Indian Act*. Provincial governments who were being asked to accept responsibility for Indian peoples and the programs supporting them also denounced the White Paper. After several months of stormy debate, it was officially withdrawn in the spring of 1970.

One positive impact the White Paper of 1969 had was to unite Indian organizations and leaders in the superordinate goal of opposing government's unilateral attempt to make decisions on behalf of Indian peoples without their input. From the scattered Indian organizations with undefined and general goals in 1969, there are now groups with a clear vision of what self-government entails.

In the meantime, the terminology referring to the original inhabitants of

Canada evolved. "Native" reflected indigenous. "Aboriginal" was preferred by most political organizations as it encompasses Metis, Inuit, status and non-status.

On August 6, 1991, the Premier of Ontario, and the Minister Responsible for Native Affairs, signed the Statement of Political Relationship with the Chiefs-in-Assembly. The Chiefs-in-Assembly represent those Aboriginal peoples who have a land base, i.e., they originate from a reserve. ("First Nations" has been adopted to refer to these people. The term was chosen to correct the misconception that the English and the French, are the two founding nations of Canada.) The basic premises of this statement for the Aboriginal peoples of Ontario are:

- the recognition of the inherent right of First Nations people to self-government (establishes a basis for negotiations to take place which will facilitate the re-emergence of First Nations jurisdiction, through our laws based on our traditions);
- the establishment of a government-to-government relationship between First Nations and Ontario (examines how to remove the assumed provincial jurisdiction over our lands and peoples);
- the commitment of First Nations and the Government of Ontario to negotiate the exercise and the implementation of First Nations jurisdiction and their right to control their own lives.[9]

This Statement of Political Relationship does not include some independent First Nations and non-land- based Aboriginal peoples not represented by First Nations (including non-status and Metis).

As part of the movement towards self-government, Aboriginal communities and organizations are assuming more control over their own affairs. Education, including literacy, is key to such control.

LANGUAGE ISSUES

In recent years, Aboriginal issues have come to the forefront of the political agenda. Aboriginal literacy is no exception. The following comprehensive national initiatives examined literacy as it pertains to Aboriginal peoples.

- *Aboriginal Literacy Action Plan*, Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, 1990. Six working groups of practitioners involved in the delivery of educational services to Aboriginal peoples across Canada met to discuss Aboriginal literacy issues and to formulate a strategy;
- *You Took My Talk: Aboriginal Literacy and Empowerment*, the fourth report of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, House of Commons, Ottawa, 1990. The Committee is a permanent structure which reports to Parliament. The Committee invited written and verbal submissions from Aboriginal literacy practitioners across Canada. Based on these submissions, the committee made recommendations on Aboriginal literacy to parliament.
- *Towards Linguistic Justice*, Assembly of First Nations, Ottawa, 1990. The Assembly is a national organization whose members constitute many First

Nations communities across Canada. All First Nations were invited to complete a questionnaire. This questionnaire identified number of speakers, and extent of use, of Aboriginal languages. The report made recommendations on assistance needed to address problems being encountered.

- *The Native Literacy Research Report*, Native Adult Education Resource Centre, Salmon Arm, B.C., 1990. The authors of this report devised a questionnaire identifying barriers to education for Aboriginal peoples. They also researched existing Aboriginal literacy programs. They made recommendations about Aboriginal literacy programs.

Consensus amongst these reports was that Aboriginal languages (and culture) are in need of revitalization. The dual forces of language and culture help communities sustain and maintain a strong identity.[10]

The dilemma for Aboriginal peoples in Ontario is that English and French are the official languages. Literacy in one's mother tongue strengthens acquisition of literacy in a second language. According to Betty Harnum of Yellowknife, "...literacy in a native language must not be viewed as a vehicle for developing English/French literacy. It must be viewed as a goal in itself, and as the only desired form of literacy for some individuals...We must be cautious that we do not insist on literacy as a vehicle of assimilation, but, rather, as a method for individuals to seek knowledge and make informed choices."[11] Aboriginal literacy components, therefore, must examine reasons for existence.

PLACING EDUCATION INTO CULTURE

For Aboriginal peoples, "learning must be associated with spiritual, physical, and emotional growth, as well as academic growth. Traditional First Nations methodology of teaching and learning must be considered. It is imperative that First Nations use the strategy of placing education into culture rather than continuing the practice of placing culture into education".[12]

How does an Aboriginal literacy practitioner place education into culture? First and foremost is the holistic approach. Life cannot be compartmentalized. Each and every thing in the universe is a part of the whole creation. In honouring the creation, we honour the Creator. In fact, we derive our teachings from the creation. These teachings permeate our everyday lives.

The most common teaching, the circle, can be used to explain the holistic approach. The Creator has given us ample evidence of the importance of the circle. The sun, moon and the earth are in the shape of a circle. Life is a series of cycles, which can be likened to circles. We experience the cycles of the days, months and seasons. Picture a series of four concentric circles, with the inner circle being "self", the second circle being "family", the third being "community", and the fourth being "universe". We have a responsibility to keep "self" physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually healthy. "Self" interacts with the family which, in turn, impacts on the community and finally affects our relationship with the universe. The energy from these interactions flows in

both directions — inwards and outwards.

The elements of self, community, family and the universe are to be considered in setting up the program. Further, literacy is a tool in personal empowerment and community development. It is, therefore, useful to keep in mind how these programs can enhance the spiritual, economic, political, and social aspects of community, in addition to the educational.

Self

The institutional educational system has, for the most part, not promoted the strengths, needs and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples. The curriculum, teaching styles and, in some cases, the entire structure, has disempowered Aboriginal peoples.

Many Aboriginal peoples were educated in a residential school system. For over the first half of the twentieth century, Aboriginal children were systematically removed from their families and communities and sent to a residential school. In these schools, the focus was on teaching the non- Aboriginal society's way of life to Aboriginal students. One of the tragic results of this approach was that the culture and languages of most Aboriginal peoples was weakened and almost lost.

Aboriginal communities are in various stages of "healing" from the aftermath of the residential school system. Community-based Aboriginal literacy programs are an integral part of this healing process. Healing means the revitalization of our language and culture. "Language is our unique relationship to the Creator, our attitudes, beliefs, values, and fundamental notions of what is truth. Our languages are the cornerstone of who we are as a People. Without our languages, our culture cannot survive".[13]

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that some Aboriginal peoples have adopted the ways of the non-Aboriginal society. We must respect their choice. There are others who are lost between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures. A strong cross-cultural component to the literacy programs raises their awareness of what is happening to them and allows them to choose with which culture they will identify.

Geography is another important consideration in literacy programming. There are 138 First Nations Territories in Ontario. Some of these are near urban centres; others are remote. Some are in the north; others are in the south. Some are able to generate their own revenue; others are dependent on transfer payments from provincial and federal governments.

The quality of life in First Nations communities can vary from that of relative self-sufficiency to that of abject poverty. Approximately fifty percent of Aboriginal peoples in Ontario live in urban centres, either because they so choose or because they do not have a land base. "What they have found more often than not in these concrete jungles is a world where they are unwelcome, where their

facial features, accents, hair-styles, history, and way of thinking keep them apart from other city dwellers, a world where they exist in a political vacuum, the responsibility of no one in particular and considered the burden of many".[14] Thus, the needs of Aboriginal peoples in each of these settings vary widely.

Family/Intergenerational

The residential school system has had a debilitating effect on family relationships as well. Government made unilateral decisions to remove Aboriginal children from their homes for long periods of time to be educated in the non-Aboriginal environment. In the absence of a supportive, home-like atmosphere during their formative years, many individuals found it difficult to develop healthy ways of relating to family. However, because of the current revitalization of culture, Aboriginal peoples are, once again, able to place a strong emphasis on family, including extended family.

The family is the primary medium of cultural continuity and an invaluable part of the social context in which literacy occurs.[15] Intergenerational literacy components are natural ways to teach mothers and/or fathers meaningful ways to interact with their children.

Further, Elders can be an integral part of literacy. Traditionally, Elders played a vital leadership role in passing on cultural teachings and knowledge. Living in closely knit extended families, they played a key role in passing on history, culture, language and skills to younger generations.[16] Through literacy programming, Elders can again transmit their wisdom to the community.

The Community

The Assembly of First Nations developed a policy paper, *Indian Control of Indian Education*, which firmly laid out the principles of local control and parental responsibility as the basis for First Nations jurisdiction over education. In 1973, the Government of Canada accepted the policy paper in principle as the national policy statement. The National Review of First Nations Education (1984) found that, in practice, First Nations have very limited jurisdiction over education programs. In fact, the first time that many Aboriginal communities and organizations had control over their own educational programming was in the development of community-based literacy programs.

"Community" has two meanings. For on-reserve programs, community refers to the actual geographical location. People living in this region have common experiences, concerns, and aspirations. They could be political, educational, spiritual, cultural or economic. For off-reserve programs, community encompasses the individuals who identify themselves as Aboriginal peoples. What they have in common with on-reserve programs is an Aboriginal identity.

Off-reserve Aboriginal peoples may want to preserve their language and culture. They may have had no exposure to it and now want to learn.

One of the greatest limits of the Aboriginal community is the demands placed on their time and energy. Those who have the skills and knowledge to be actively involved in community issues are asked to be on numerous boards and committees. While Rupert Ross was describing a reserve, the same could be said of Aboriginal communities off-reserve:

> The amount of administrative and other talent it takes to apply for, create and then maintain essential services in small reserve communities is, in a word, staggering. The same few councillors must be the school board, the police commission, the welfare office, the housing authority, the social services agencies and the provider of virtually all jobs. If our municipal politicians ever had their duties expanded to such a degree, there would be resignations everywhere. Yet, even in communities as small as three hundred people, that is the load borne by band councils.[17]

Universe

"With education comes the opportunity to exercise choice."[18] Traditional Aboriginal cultures have always viewed themselves as a part of the universe, not apart from the universe. *The Indian Act* set Aboriginal peoples apart by segregating them onto reserves and creating further divisions such as status and non-status. In the realities of a multicultural society, Aboriginal peoples must have the choice of where and how they wish to live. Aboriginal literacy programs need to find ways to assist Aboriginal peoples to exercise choice.

THE ONTARIO NATIVE LITERACY COALITION (ONLC)

The ONLC is comprised of the thirty-one literacy projects funded through the Ministry of Education. Sixteen of the projects are urban-centred, fourteen are on-reserve, and one is in a Metis community. The projects operate either through a band council, local friendship centre, or a training program. Thirty-nine literacy practitioners, thirty-one female and eight male, are working in these projects.

The mandate of the ONLC is to support Aboriginal literacy through:

- information and opportunities for effective networking;
- their video, *Native Literacy: A Healing Energy* and other means as required;
- training for Native literacy practitioners;
- culturally-sensitive program materials; and,
- advocacy on a community, regional, provincial and national level.

The Practitioners

The practitioners are people from the home community. This has important implications in that they have knowledge of the community (and its individuals). They have knowledge of the Aboriginal culture. In some cases, the practitioners are fluent in the Aboriginal language of the community.

Other qualifications include: a sincere belief in the student; experience with some of the issues the students are encountering; creative abilities (including artistic or musical talent); good organizational skills; and, a deep commitment to improving the quality of life for Aboriginal peoples.

Of all the practitioners whom I interviewed, only two offered their level of formal education as a qualification for their position. This makes a strong statement that Aboriginal as opposed to Western qualifications are much more beneficial to those working with Aboriginal peoples.

The Co-ordinator

Co-ordinating a community-based Aboriginal literacy program is a demanding position. As the programs offer one-to-one and/or small group tutoring, the co-ordinator must recruit students and, where possible, tutors. The co-ordinator usually does the tutoring. For those programs who are able to recruit tutors, the co-ordinator provides tutor training which encompasses literacy awareness, cross-cultural awareness (the holistic approach); and, techniques for teaching adults. Because of the student-centred approach, the co-ordinator must either develop curriculum or adapt existing materials to make them applicable to the students' situations.

Further, because the grants from the Ministry of Education cover only core operating costs, most programs do fundraising. The most successful programs find that it is best to involve the students. This way, the students feel ownership of the program and know that they are giving something in return.

The Programs

Because the literacy programs are community-based and student-centred, a variety of models have emerged. A number of communities have initiated Moms and Tots Reading Circles so that young mothers can learn to read to their children and to interact meaningfully with them. There are also homework nights for the youth to address that high drop-out rate that is such a concern to the Native community. Further, because literacy programs are seen as a way of revitalizing the culture and language, the program participants often host cultural events.

The most successful in terms of impact was the *Winds of Change Peace Assembly* by the Chippewas of Nawash program. The Assembly attracted hundreds of people from across the country for a weekend of teachings by Aboriginal Elders and traditional teachers.

The students identify what it is they want to learn. Most programs use the whole language approach. The students' own stories comprise the curriculum. Various comprehension, vocabulary and grammar exercises are devised from these stories. In many cases, the students will request life skills exercises — dealing with grief/loss, positive parenting — all from an Aboriginal perspective. Often, the students request educational and moral support with correspondence, community college and, in a few cases, university courses.

Finally, students have gained the confidence to request literacy in their Aboriginal language. There are fourteen projects throughout Ontario in which the program participants are doing innovative things such as devising crossword puzzle books in the Aboriginal language, and developing theme units complete with pictures in both English and the Aboriginal language of the community. Because the students are involved in the process, they are empowered and becoming more active in the community.

SPECIAL INITIATIVES

Students have been instrumental in a number of special literacy initiatives. Their requests and needs have resulted in innovative approaches to literacy.

In Kenora, numerous students requested assistance in getting their drivers' licences. They found studying the drivers' manual boring and difficult. The co-ordinator then devised a game similar to *Trivial Pursuit*, but based on the drivers' manual. The game is in plain English, making it easier than the driver's manual for the students to understand.

The Chippewas of Saugeen students wanted to go to art school, but were not eligible because of the Grade 12 admission criteria. The co-ordinator then decided to bring the art school to the students. She obtained a grant to pay honoraria and travel expenses for Aboriginal artists from all over the province to share their skills and to transmit their artistic knowledge. In addition to enhancing their artistic abilities, students honed their note-taking, critiquing and listening skills. Further, each student donated one piece of artwork to the program to be used for fundraising.

In the Metis community around Burleigh Falls, the students themselves produced the community newsletter, circulating 2,000 copies monthly. The newsletter provided an important community information service, and outreach tool for recruitment of students in the program and participants in other activities of the host organization. Students gain marketable skills such as word processing, desktop publishing, layout and design, as well as practice in writing. The newsletter also provides an opportunity for them to display their artwork.

In Sioux Lookout, students are involved in running a bookstore. This project began through book sales which were a tremendous success because of the introduction of an extensive selection of books for adults and children by Aboriginal authors, and the fact that the nearest good bookstore was a six hours' drive away in Winnipeg. Students are involved in writing bibliographies of the books, taking inventory, and making transactions with customers. The bookstore will be an important fundraising venture for the program. Although it is only in its initial stages, the project co-ordinator says the bookstore is well-received in the area. These are just a few examples of how students not only guide the direction of the program, but give back to it and the community.

TRAINING FOR THE PRACTITIONERS

In early 1990, the board of directors of the ONLC and I designed a training plan with Tribal Sovereignty Associates. Many practitioners reported a feeling of isolation (most Aboriginal literacy practitioners are a few hours' drive from each other). The practitioners could be brought together for a week at a time every three months for five sessions. The courses would lead to an Aboriginal Literacy and Communications Certificate through the First Nations Technical Institute. The practitioners had input every step of the way. They chose to meet in different parts of the province where there are successful programs operating. They then saw what the practitioner in that area has been able to accomplish, giving them the incentive to do likewise in their home community. In addition to the formal workshops, a lot of ideas were exchanged after hours.

I will now describe what the practitioners have identified as the two most important courses in helping them to enhance self-esteem in their students.

Healing Circles

By far the most effective technique is the Healing Circle, conducted by someone who has been trained in co-counselling which is based on the principle that we, as human beings, are naturally wholesome and good. We are also naturally moved to feeling caring and loving about ourselves and others, are intelligent and have the ability to operate logically and rationally. However, these abilities can be seriously impaired by stressful events which have not been resolved. We, therefore, need a way to "discharge" the emotions that inhibit enjoyment of life, or block new learning. The person requesting a healing invites people he or she can trust. These people and the co-counsellor sit in a circle facing each other.

The Healing Circle usually begins in the traditional Aboriginal manner. In Southern Ontario, we use sweetgrass which grows in marshy places and is regarded as Mother Earth's hair. It is braided into three to represent the mind,

body and the soul. We light one end of the sweetgrass with a match. The smoke that ensues represents our thoughts going up to the Creator. We brush this smoke over our eyes so that we will have a good vision, over our ears so that we will hear good things, over our mouths so that we will choose our words wisely, and over our hearts so that our thoughts will be positive. Each person in the Circle "smudges" in this manner and someone in the Circle says a prayer to the Creator.

The Healing Circle follows the cycles of performance identified earlier. The person (co-counsellee) requesting the healing shares with those present the troubling issue so that they have an "awareness" of it. Trust is critical. The co-counsellee then goes deeper into the issue to identify the "struggle". The co-counsellor will direct the person to "feel" and not to rationalize. Often, the co-counsellee goes into a "discharge" reliving the painful experience. The co-counsellor guides the person through the process, all the while providing assurance that they are in control of what to do with that feeling and that the feeling is not controlling them. When the discharge is complete, the person is ready to move into the "building" stage. The co-counsellor brings the person back to a state of emotional well-being by pointing out the positive that has come out of that experience, and encouraging a positive statement about the experience. When the co-counsellee is able to repeat the statement with conviction, they usually are able to see the next step to ensure maintenance of the good feeling.

Others present will be experiencing empathy throughout the process. At this point, they will share how they handled a similar experience or will remind the co-counsellee of other examples in which they demonstrated the ability being pointed out. The bonding that takes place during these Healing Circles has been conducive to excellent networking when the practitioners are back in their home communities.

Prior Learning Assessment

The second most effective component of the Aboriginal Literacy and Communications Course is the Portfolio Development process, also referred to as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). PLA assists people to identify college level learning which may have occurred outside of the formal classroom. The focus of this process is the student's prior learning experiences. These experiences may have been gained in the workplace, the business or service world, or through involvement in home and/or community activities. The student is shown how to:

- identify and record prior learning experiences;
- determine individual strengths, weaknesses, interests and needs; and,
- share information with other participants.

In preparing a portfolio, an individual analyzes significant events and/or

people in their life. The object of this analysis of **self** is to determine knowledge, skills and attitudes learned in each instance. Then examines **family** relationships to identiy any helping philosophy that was learned. Following this is an exploration o how this helping philosophy was applied in interactions in the **community**, be they positive or negative. Finally, the individual explores their support systems in relations to the larger **society**. The portfolio is prepared with the tutelage of someone with expertise in the PLA process. It can take up to a year to complete for an individual who is also working full-time while taking the course.

Several important documents accompany the portfolio. They include an up-to-date resume; a list of resources contributing to the individual's growth; and several references. Upon completion of the portfolio, the individual then meets with faculty members for an oral discussion which will centre on claims in relation to course outcomes and competency guidelines.

PLA is a lengthy and involved process. However, in addition to receiving advanced standing in one or more of the courses in the Aboriginal Literacy and Communications Course, the practitioners are then able to apply the principle of validating life experiences of their students.

TO PRESERVE ORAL HISTORY & TO ENHANCE THE PRESENT

> Paradoxically...oral cultures must interact with the printed word and the symbol, both for renewal and survival. Oral cultures are fast disappearing. Cultures can no longer be perpetuated through orality.[19]

In this renaissance of Aboriginal culture, people are turning to the wisdom of the past. In 1990, International Literacy Year, several programs undertook Oral History projects to document the teachings of the Elders. The students in one program even wrote their own project proposal. They identified what they wanted to learn, who would be able to teach them, and by what means this information could be preserved for posterity.

Students in the West Bay First Nation literacy program created an exhibit on the traditional clan system. In Aboriginal culture, clans are named after animals. Students researched the skills, attributes and responsibilities of the animals whose clans are represented in West Bay. By assembling a display, the students were able to pass on these teachings to community members.

In other communities, students interviewed Elders. The Elders either gave a bit of history of the community or they passed on a teaching. Students then transcribed the audiotapes. In some cases, the Elders loaned pictures that they had kept for years to the literacy program. In other cases, the students illustrated the words of the Elders. These pictures and transcriptions were compiled into booklets.

Aboriginal literacy practitioners recognize that the written word is not the only way to express oneself. Theatre is another medium. The Nokee Kwe program in London developed a play entitled *Grace and Lillian*. The script was based on a composite of students' stories. The play toured the Southwestern Ontario region. It served as a promotional tool for literacy and as a fundraiser for the sponsors.

The co-ordinator of the Fort Erie program is a student in the very program she co-ordinates. She had been labelled "dyslexic" in the institutional educational system. She was initially a volunteer and a student in the program. Funding became available for her to do a work placement with the program. When the co-ordinator left, she capably assumed his position, and continues with her tutoring sessions. An assistant transcribes letters and reports that the co-ordinator dictates into a tape recorder. This woman re-wrote an Aboriginal legend into play format, and then recruited students and volunteers in the program to act in the play. Program participants prepared and served a traditional feast after the play. This "dinner theatre" served as a promotional tool and fundraiser for the literacy programs. Practitioners have been ingenious in helping students to develop literacy skills while capitalizing on various media to transmit information.

REFLECTIONS

Of the 31 Aboriginal literacy projects, fourteen have a Literacy in an Aboriginal Language component. Practitioners have had to be very creative in how these components are funded. Some projects are funded from the federal government as pilot projects. Funding is for one-time only projects. In other cases, the co-ordinator is bilingual and is able to offer literacy in English and/or the Aboriginal language of the community. In still other cases, the local program may have a private arrangement with the instructor of the Aboriginal language literacy component. In one of the northern programs, the instructor teaches one evening class a week in return for a monthly bus pass.

One concern is that the instructor may or may not be teaching the dialect of the community. Geography is a factor that determines dialect. Aboriginal peoples tend to be migratory, perhaps in search of a job. In addition, intermarriage may mean that parents speak two different dialects and the children of that union are thus exposed to both. This raises the question, "What dialect should be taught in the program?" Quite often the determining factor is the available instructor. As with the literacy practitioners, Aboriginal language instructors spend hours preparing curriculum materials. Often these materials cannot be distributed widely as they are prepared in the dialect of the instructor.

Staff in the Literacy Branch of the Ministry of Education desired that the written form of the Aboriginal languages be standardized to facilitate distribution of materials. We believe that if the communities want standardization, it

would have to be done in two streams. Stream A would be for those Aboriginal languages in which there already is a modern linguistic foundation. A linguistic conference could be used to settle the most basic questions of standardization, e.g., writing systems, word formation. Ideally, there should be a linguistic conference for each group of a specific language community, with conferences to be held over the next five years.

Stream B would be for those Aboriginal languages which require further linguistic work. The Ministry of Education, in co-operation with linguists, Elders, Aboriginal language specialists and teachers, as well as the Aboriginal community organizations, will co-sponsor the preparation and publication of dictionaries and grammars as the foundation for standard, literary languages. Once basic linguistic tools, such as dictionaries are available, linguistic conferences can be held to establish a literary language.

Stream A and Stream B are in the initial stages. We have identified co-sponsors from the Aboriginal community. The Ontario Government will provide only the funds for standardization. It is the Aboriginal communities themselves that will decide what direction the project will take.

Further, the ONLC is in the initial stages of setting up an Aboriginal Literacy Foundation. The tasks for the ONLC in setting up the proposed foundation include:

- to open dialogue with provincial and federal sources to facilitate funding for continued support of Aboriginal literacy programs and the expansion of literacy programming to all Aboriginal groups within Ontario;
- to secure funding from private sectors for development of language initiatives;
- to create a First Nations Languages Advisory Council; and,
- to create a regional advisory board to help give focus and direction to the Board of Directors of the foundation based on the interests of their various regions and supporting bodies.

The growth within the last five years has been encouraging. Within the next five years, Aboriginal literacy projects will be seen as a viable force within their communities. Indeed, several of the regional and provincial Aboriginal political organizations are now beginning to agree with the ONLC that literacy is an important first step in the self-determination process. All in all, the ONLC is instrumental in assisting practitioners to use literacy to empower individuals and to build more competent communities.

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